



## United States Mission to the OSCE

# **The Russian Federation's Ongoing Aggression Against Ukraine**

As delivered by Ambassador Michael Carpenter  
to the Permanent Council, Vienna  
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Dear colleagues, last year on March 30, the Mayor of the Ukrainian city of Melitopol, Ivan Fedorov, addressed us here. He told us of his harrowing ordeal of being abducted from his office by Russian forces and marched to a small cell with a bag over his head, unable to see where he was. He was then threatened and interrogated by his Russian captors for six days. After his release, he came here to the OSCE to ask us to stand with his city and to support Ukraine in the face of a brutal onslaught that seemed impossible even as it was unfolding before our eyes.

Today, I'd like to come back to Melitopol, a city with a population of nearly 150,000 people that has been on the frontlines of Russia's war of aggression from the very start. Since February 24 of last year, the people of Melitopol have suffered tremendously through the brutal realities of Russia's occupation: filtration operations, holding cells, torture, interrogations, apartment searches, forced passportization, knowing that every trip to the grocery store or the pharmacy could end with a Gestapo-like search and seizure by Russia's forces. So I asked Mayor Fedorov to give us an update on the experience of his constituents. Here's what he wrote: "for more than a year of occupation, Melitopol has become the largest prison in the world, where the occupiers commit genocide for any manifestation of the Ukrainian position. Civilians are put 'in the basement', tortured and deported for [having] the Ukrainian flag. Recently, the occupiers have expelled a woman from the city because her child is studying online in a Ukrainian school. During the year, more than 1,000 civilians were captured by the Russian military. Hundreds of people remain behind bars, some for more than a year. The occupiers have accelerated the pace of forcing passporting, because they are trying to spread to the whole world the propaganda that Russia supposedly protects its citizens. However, the most terrible crime is committed against our children. The invaders force everyone – from kindergarten to university students – to join one of the paramilitary Russian youth organizations, the essence of which boils down to one thing: 'Ukraine is evil, Russia must be loved.'"

Russia's occupation of Melitopol brought with it lawlessness and impunity on a scale not seen for decades in the European theater. One resident described their experience as follows: "at first, they [Russia's forces] were ordered not to touch anything but to hold the city, but then they began to feel their impunity. We left because what is called 'lawlessness' broke out. Outside military forces were immediately visible because they behaved like a 'mob': they threatened, looted and kidnapped people." A long-term resident of Melitopol, Maryna, explained how Russia's forces first stole her food, then extorted \$1,000 dollars from her to let her keep her own car, only to then subsequently kidnap and torture her. Maryna was beaten three times over the span of 22 days before being released in a prisoner exchange. She describes the conduct of Russia's occupation forces as follows: "they could simply come to

your house without saying where they take you or why. It's a very common thing. They threatened to break my nose, beat me on the floor, and hand me over to the Chechen soldiers for 'entertainment.'”

Once Russia occupied Melitopol, torture chambers and detention centers became an everyday fact of life, according to many reports. At least five torture chambers are known to exist in the city as we speak. The people of Melitopol learned what kind of torture or ill-treatment to expect at each. You knew if you went to a certain one, you would be starved and exposed to winter temperatures. Others were brutal in different ways. Survivors describe staying in overcrowded cells or small windowless cubes for long periods. They were forced to sleep on the floor where raw sewage puddled. Loud music in Russian, including songs about suicide, blasted at full volume for 17 hours a day, making it impossible for anyone to rest.

Reports of torture around Melitopol have also been corroborated through the testimonials of ex-Russian Federation forces. Former senior Russian army officer Konstantin Yefremov described the torture he witnessed taking place around Melitopol. According to Yefremov, "one of them [a Ukrainian prisoner of war] admitted to being a sniper. On hearing this, the Russian colonel lost his mind. He hit him, he pulled the Ukrainian's trousers down and asked if he was married. 'Yes,' the prisoner replied. 'Then someone bring me a mop,' said the colonel." I won't continue with the description - he goes on - but suffice it to say that such episodes of sexual violence by Russia's forces are not rare.

Residents of Melitopol also describe men between the ages of 20 and 50 being forcibly conscripted into the army to fight against Ukraine, their own country. According to these residents, locals who refused to be conscripted were tortured. Melitopol resident Sasha describes the experience of his neighbor and friend who refused three times to be conscripted. The first time he ignored the conscription papers, Russia's troops kept him in a basement for three days. The second time, they tortured him for a week. The third time, they tortured him for a month. Unable to break him, his tormentors finally broke his kneecap to disable him.

Mr. Chair, these are just a few accounts that give some insight into what the people of Ukraine are living through in Russia-occupied Melitopol. From what we have seen in Bucha, Kherson, Kharkiv, and elsewhere in Ukraine, it's rather clear that Russia's brutality won't stop until Ukraine is able to regain control of its territory. The people of Melitopol still have hope that the international community has not forgotten about them. They remain unbent, their belief in liberation still alive. As Mayor Fedorov told me: “from the very beginning, [the people of Melitopol] showed clear resistance to the enemy – in the first days of the occupation, thousands of people went to rallies against the Russian invasion. For 136 days after its occupation, the pastors of the city's churches gathered on the main square of Melitopol and prayed for Ukraine, until the occupiers began to disperse the meetings and take the participants into captivity. Today, Melitopol is rightfully considered the center of the partisan movement, which keeps the occupiers in tension and does not give them peace on our land. Partisans destroy the logistic routes of the occupiers – they blow up railway and road overpasses. Intelligence officers provide the Defense Forces of Ukraine with information about the location of Russian military bases, after which the Ukrainian military successfully eliminates enemy groups.”

Mr. Chair, the spirit of Melitopol is the spirit of Ukraine. It's powerful. So, dear colleagues, after you leave today's Permanent Council and walk out into the bright spring air, have your dinners, enjoy your evening with your spouses and families, spare a moment to think of the

people of Melitopol. What if our roles were reversed? What if you were sitting in their shoes and they were sitting here? What would you do? What would you ask for? What would you expect from us?

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